

May 5, 2017

Reflections from the Bishop on “Presidential Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty” and the “American Health Care Act”

On Thursday, May 4, 2017, two actions from Washington have left me with some theological musings about the Church’s role in the public square.

Presidential Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty

First, the President issued the “Presidential Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty” (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/05/04/presidential-executive-order-promoting-free-speech-and-religious-liberty>). It essentially encourages Federal agencies to not vigorously enforce the law (the so called Johnson Amendment) that prohibits tax-exempt charitable organizations such as churches from participating directly or indirectly in any political campaign to support or oppose a particular candidate. That means no donations to candidates’ campaigns and no public statements explicitly on behalf of or against a candidate. It calls for new rules around the affordable care to provide greater “conscience based” objections to employers. In the end, I think the order is generally symbolic.

It will have little impact on the Episcopal Church or the Diocese of Hawai’i. In principle, I think the rejection of the endorsement (or explicit rejection) of specific candidates or of political parties by churches is very important to the political process and especially to the Church itself. When the Church is too identified with individual candidates or with political parties, it loses its moral voice. The Church (and from the Episcopal Church that is often through acts of General Convention and through the teaching office of the clergy) must speak out on moral and civic issues. I am fully aware that different religious traditions have differing perspectives on various issues, but all such voices need to be heard. We must be clear on our values and principles when speaking out.

I specifically think that the Episcopal Church should follow the advice of William Temple (1881-1944), the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942 to 1944, when dealing with social and political issues: “So we answer the question ‘How should the Church interfere?’ by saying: In three ways -- (1) its members must fulfill their moral responsibilities and functions in a Christian spirit; (2) its members must exercise their purely civic rights in a Christian spirit; (3) it must itself supply them with a systematic statement of principles to aid them in doing these two things, and this will carry with it a denunciation of customs or institutions in contemporary life and practice which offend against those principles” [*Christianity & Social Order*. Penguin Books, 1942, p. 21].

In the Episcopal Church, “A bishop in God’s holy Church is called to be one with the apostles in proclaiming Christ’s resurrection and interpreting the Gospel, and to testify to Christ’s sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings.” The Bishop also promises to be “...merciful to all, show compassion to the poor and strangers, and defend those who have no helper” (The Book of Common Prayer, “The Ordination of a Bishop,” pp. 517-518). This teaching function of the Bishop includes speaking on social, political and civic issues. That goes as

well, I think, for Priests and Deacons. Further, engaged Christian political involvement is the responsibility of every baptized member of the Episcopal Church. I would suggest that we are called to engage the community and the political process primarily as the baptized members of the body of Christ with the Baptismal Covenant (and a sacramental world-view) and the Scripture (understood from the perspective of tradition and reason) as the beginning basis of our first principles. To learn more about work of the Episcopal Church in the civic sphere I suggest reading the information about the Episcopal Public Policy Network (EPPN) and viewing the video of introduction of that aspect of the Church's mission on the EPPN webpage at <http://advocacy.episcopalchurch.org/?0>.

Finally, while I do not think it appropriate for the Church to endorse candidates or political parties, I think the Church must speak up when policies and actions are immoral, unjust or just plain wrong-headed. We do so from our perspective of faith and a particular religious tradition. Likewise, I do not begrudge leaders of other traditions when they speak in ways with which I (and the Episcopal Church) disagree. Their voices are needed. I am called to speak to members of the Episcopal Church in Hawai'i and on behalf of the Church to civic leaders. I welcome dialogue about application of our faith in the public square and how we engage our faith in Jesus Christ in dealing with the problems of the world.

American Health Care Act

It was with this in mind that I pondered the other action that came out of Washington. The House of Representatives passed what is entitled the "American Health Care Act" on May 4. I, like many members of the House of Representatives (at least so it seems from statements), have not read the legislation in detail (though I have read sections). I have begun to read summaries, articles and commentary on the impact of the legislation and from a theological perspective it appears to be sorely wanting and wrong-headed (for details of the legislation see <https://congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1628/>).

As Episcopalians, we focus our moral view of the world through the lens of the Baptismal Covenant (see the Book of Common Prayer, page 304). The first three clauses (those based on the Apostles' Creed) provide a Trinitarian basis for our faith and common life that is grounded in the mutuality and community of the Divine. The next five clauses of the Covenant define our relationship as the Body of Christ (the Church) to one another and to the world. I think the last clause is key for addressing concerns about health care. This includes the promise that we will "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being". (The Book of Common Prayer is available online at <http://www.bcponline.org>)

Because of our faith in God known in the Holy Trinity and in the sacredness of humanity because of the Incarnation, we must seek the common good for all human beings. As citizens, our faith shapes our response to government policy and political statements. We are also grounded in Scripture as the narrative that shapes our world-view. Jesus Christ sets the moral norm for the Christian life in the exchange with a legal expert in Luke 10:25-37. There, the Great Commandment ("You must love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.") is explicated with the story of the Good Samaritan.

The French Christian philosopher, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), wrote: "Christianity announced to the peoples the kingdom of God and the life to come; it has taught them the unity of the human race, the natural equality of all men, children of the same God and redeemed by the same Christ, the inalienable dignity of every soul fashioned in the image of God, the dignity of labor and the dignity of the poor, the primacy of inner values and of good will over external values, the inviolability of consciences, the exact vigilance of God's justice and providence over the great and the small . . . and that it is up to us to make every man our neighbor, by loving him as ourselves and by having compassion for him, that is, in a sense, by dying unto ourselves for his sake." [Maritain, Jacques (2012-02-17). *Christianity and Democracy*. Ignatius Press, Kindle Edition, originally published in 1949].

Maritain's influence can be seen in "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)." The Declaration was drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world and that team included Maritain. The Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948 ([General Assembly resolution 217 A](#)) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations (see <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>). Article 25 states: "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."

I am not certain that language of "rights" is always helpful for Christians. Concerns for "rights" often leads to individualism and lawsuits. As Christians, we look to the common good and with the recognition that the care of others is primary. We live in a nation founded on basic principles and rights. I suggest that as our understanding of those "rights" has evolved through the centuries, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" offers an understanding of how the "common good" can be embodied in the culturally conditioned notions of "rights" (at least for that moment and understanding that any notion of "rights" is subject to change with time). We are looking to the "dignity of every human being." The care for the dignity of others leads me to the conclusion that Christians must insist that all people deserve medical care. That leads me to conclude that perhaps a single payer system (universal Medicare), some form of national health care system or some other mandated "universal" public/private coverage system are the most morally justifiable systems of health care and that any "program" that fails to ensure healthcare for all fails the test of morally acceptable for a follower of Jesus Christ. The official position of the Episcopal Church calls for "establishing a 'single payer' universal health care program which would provide health care coverage for all of the people of the United States" (General Convention 2009, Resolution D48, https://episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2009-D048).

I have therefore concluded that the “American Health Care Act” as adopted by the House of Representatives is a moral failure being unjust and imprudent.